

CAG's Taiwan Trip Report

From 3 May to 9 May, 2015, the team of Centre on Asia and Globalisation (CAG), consisting of Professor Huang Jing, Dr. Selina Ho, Dr. Tomoo Kikuchi, Mr. Takehiro Masutomo and Ms. Jenny Li Jie, paid a visit to Taiwan.

We had meaningful exchanges with the primary research institutes and top think tanks from both Kuomintang (KMT) and Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) on the issues of shared interests in three cities. In Taipei, we held a roundtable with Dr. Athur Ding and his colleagues at the Institute of International Studies at the National Chengchi University; we had luncheons with Dr. Su Chi, former Secretary-General of the National Security Council and presently Chairman of Taipei Forum, and officials of Ministry of Foreign Affairs; we met with Dr. Lin Chu-Chia, First Deputy Minister of the Mainland Affairs Council; we also held roundtables with scholars and policy experts from the KMT-sponsored Prospect Foundation and the DPP-sponsored New Frontier Foundation. In Taichung, we visited the Economic Development Bureau of the city government, and had a meaningful discussion with former Defence Minister Michael Tsai and Professor Tsai Ming-Yen at National Chung-Hsing University. In Kaohsiung, we had a seminar with Center for Japanese Studies of National Sun Yat-sen University, and exchanged views with Dr. Liu Shyh-Fang, former vice Mayor of Kaohsiung city and a major figure in the DPP establishment, as well as her advisors Dr. Lin Wen-Cheng and Dr. Chu Wen-Jang.

This was a very interesting time to visit Taiwan. The ruling KMT just suffered a humiliating setback in the mid-term election, which has helped the DPP gain momentum in the upcoming presidential campaign under the leadership of Madam Tsai Ing-Wen. Such a situation has stirred up a good number of concerns from both sides of the Taiwan Strait as well as the United States and its ally Japan. While the Mainland China has always been concerned about the DPP, whose party guideline is Taiwan's independence, a victory of Madam Tsai Ing-Wen would obviously deal a serious blow to the Cross-Strait relations, given the DPP as well as Madam Tsai's advocacy for de jure independence. As such, it seems that the Cross-Strait relations will suffer another setback after eight years of stability under the KMT's rule. Moreover, such development would also exert a substantial impact on US-China relations, given that the Taiwan issue has been one of the major issues in the bilateral relationship, especially when it comes to the US Taiwan Relations Act and its arms sales to Taiwan. What makes the entire situation more complicated is that, in the wake of US's "rebalance" to Asia, it is inevitable that the US-Japan alliance will be reinforced vis-à-vis China's rise. As a result, any complication of the Taiwan issue would provoke unpredictable tensions which could become explosive in terms of regional peace and prosperity.

In the exchanges with the scholars and policy experts in Taiwan, our discussion primarily focused on following areas:

- Cross-Strait relations
- US-China relations and its impact on the relations across the Taiwan Strait
- China-Japan relations -- the tension between two countries and its impact on the Taiwan issue
- The prospect of US-Japan alliance and its impact on Cross-Strait relations

- Internal politics in both the Mainland China and Taiwan and their implications to Cross-Strait relations as well as peace and stability in the region

During our discussions, we realised that while the KMT and the DPP are geared up for the presidential campaign, the differences between the two seem irreconcilable. Such differences in their positions are demonstrated in three areas.

First, Cross-Strait relations. Whilst the KMT has accepted the “1992 consensus” as a foundation for Cross-Strait relations, the DPP has denied the existence of such a consensus, although they promise to “maintain the status quo” should they come to power. The issue could be explosive because Chinese President Xi Jinping has made it clear that “1992 consensus” is the very foundation for peace and stability between two sides of the Taiwan Strait.

Second, the approach toward the United States. It appears that the DPP will maintain status quo as defined by the US, especially by the US “One China Policy”, whereas the KMT’s approach leans towards a relationship that is in Beijing’s favour, given their acceptance of the “1992 consensus”. Such a division will have different implications to the involvement of the US in Cross-Strait relations.

Third, Taiwan’s future. On the one hand, the KMT believes a close economic relationship with the Mainland is not only necessary but also inevitable, as the irrevocable economic interdependence with the Mainland China will be essential for Taiwan’s development and stability. On the other hand, the DPP sees that a closer tie with China will entrap Taiwan into the process of reunification. Thus, instead of further development of economic exchange with the Mainland China, they want to diversify Taiwan’s economic relationship with the region, which would be seen as a fundamental challenge to Beijing’s “One China Principle” as well as Washington’s “One China Policy”.

Based on the three fundamental differences between two competing political parties in Taiwan, the US position remains strategically ambiguous. Such ambiguity implies more uncertainty, given the upcoming US presidential campaign in which the China issue will surely surface as a focus of debate. As such, the Taiwan issue will become more sensitive, not only in the debate of US internal politics, but also to US-China relations.

Our trip to Taiwan has helped us better understand the Taiwan issue and its implications to not just Cross-Strait relations but also regional peace and stability. The Taiwan issue is very much involved in the interactions among the major powers, which is one of our research focus. This trip was meaningful and fruitful. Not only has it enhanced our awareness and understanding of the problems involved in the Taiwan issue, but also helped us build a solid relationship with think tanks and research institutes in Taiwan with a wide range of political spectrum. All these will surely be very beneficial to our research as well as outreach activities toward Taiwan down the road.